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## Public Religious Disputations in England

1558–1626, St Andrews Studies in Reformation History.  
Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. 252 pages, regular  
price £ 70, 234 x 156 mm, ISBN 978-1-4724-1555-4.

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Joshua Rodda's PhD-thesis turned into a book covers a turbulent period in British and English history which was marked by religious conflicts in all sections of society and politics. Rodda argues that it is "surprising that such events have received short shrift in more recent histories." (2) A look into the catalogue of the University Library of Leipzig produced 7 relevant titles, none of which is listed in Rodda's study. Whatever the situation had been, by now the problem of inadequate attention to the subject is definitely solved. The study is a good example of thorough scholarship and text-immanent analysis in the tradition of close reading.

Subjects dealt with in the book are above all questions of difference, authority and control, the role of truth and error as well as accusations of heresy. Religious disputations in the period mentioned were used as a format for discussion of "post-Reformation controversies" (2) and "cross-confessional controversy" (148). This makes the book into a valuable addition to the present post-Reformation discourse. The study does not only deal with disputations in England, as the title suggests, but also looks into developments on the Continent. Religious disputations as a format for discussion played a central role both for Catholics and for clerics of the reformed churches (Church of England and Puritanism) in the controversial religious discourse of the period covered in the book.

Chapter 1, “Culture of Controversy”, looks into disputations as a construction which was both “distinctly malleable” (67) and also set within certain structural and functional boundaries which gave them authority in the wider complex of religious conflicts. The functions and purposes of disputations are also discussed in Chapter 5, “Disputation Distinguished”. Coming from a Cultural Studies background I would have expected more information on the historical and social background in the line of Raymond Williams’ “structure of feelings”, especially as Rodda talks about the “mindscape” (7) and the “climate of the period” (7, 195) and places the debates in the humanist discourse, what he calls the “period’s culture of discourse” (20). Information on the cultural background of the period is, however, limited and should have been increased to address a wider spectrum of possible readers. Rodda drops the occasional hint on political events, e. g. the “Spanish Match” (160, 166, 189, 193) or the “Spanish negotiations” (161, 166) without going into more detail. Most of the readers will probably know what is meant, but nevertheless, a short explanation—and if only in a footnote—would have been welcome. The same would apply in connection with William Laud, as a central figure in 17th-century religious dealings who is mentioned in chapter 1 and in more detail in chapter 6. A phrase such as “Political conditions and ecclesiastical appointments, meanwhile, continued to work against controversial debate” (194) remains rather vague and lacks some more concrete references. On the other hand the author explains the term syllogism (45–6). Though central in the relevant discourse, most readers, I assume, could have done without the explanation.

After setting the scene in chapter 1, the author moves on to “The Disputation Process” (chapter 2) and to “Disputation Exploited” (chapter 3), with descriptions on how disputations worked as a forum in universities and in private circles. The functions of participants are delineated as well as

questions of tactics and power politics (cf. 91, 96), in particular when James I, a scholar and a keen disputant, acted as moderator and as disputant with the force of his intellect and of his “royal power” (41). The audience also played an important role, as Rodda frequently points out. In this context the role of the reports of disputations are also mentioned, as accounts had gone through the filter of “memory and purpose” (63) of those who wrote them down and consequently edited them—there are, however, no titles on memory culture and the process of remembering as a social construction in the bibliography. The purpose of these accounts has to be considered in the whole debate, as they can also work as “instruments of political persuasion” (139; see also 135, 137), with “a potential for civil disruption and challenges to royal authority.” (74) Disputations were an important instrument in politics and power structures of the day for the “advance of English Protestantism” (69), at the same time they supported the defence of “Catholic certainty” (71) against the “heretical few” (71), an aspect which Rodda frequently returns to and discusses under different headings in chapters 1, 3, 6 and in “Determination”. Especially the concept of “certainty” (73) is something which both sides used, as a rule closely linked to the concept of truth and to the argument that human learning and reason alone were no “certain route to faith.” (200)

The concept of truth and the so-called “true faith” (99) is central in chapter 4, “Disputation Applied”, but it also crops up in the following chapter: “It was thus in cross-confessional controversy that disputation had its most secure mandate, as here it was applied to defend fundamental truth against absolute error” (148). What Rodda calls “Contemporary minds” (99)—something comparable to Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus, I assume—did not see public religious disputations as a means for forceful oppression, but rather as a means for defending the one and only true faith. Unfortunately both sides—the Catholic Church and the Reformed churches—had their

specific ideas about what true faith implied, and both sides relied on their particular approaches to corroborate their specific understanding of the matter. Puritans believed in their “learned confutations of Catholic arguments” (99) and they “aimed at truth” (111) in their use of the format of disputation against the Elizabethan Church Settlement. The Puritans for instance rejected the Hampton Court conference in which James I played a decisive role (cf. 152, 159, chapter 6). Representatives of Puritanism relied above all on Scripture as a source to prove their arguments and their true faith, Catholicism saw the final authority in the Church as such. Though the application of learning and reason in the tradition of scholasticism was generally accepted, “Puritans had a contradictory attitude towards learning - it was necessary in ministers, and an aid to scriptural interpretation”, but they warned of using the debates as “a fickle path into vanity and error” (118). The general argument in disputations was, that “the force of truth” (123) would have a positive effect and result in persuasion (cf. 123), or the “persuasive effort” (171), meaning to convince the opponents and the audience of the correct reading, of “truth itself” (111).

The theme of the purpose and function of disputation, the “meaning and significance” (131), is continued in chapter 5, “Disputation Distinguished”. Rodda looks beyond disputations in England, as the title of the study promises, and refers also to relevant events on the Continent, Paris above all. The accounts of anti-Catholic disputations on the Continent circulated in England and showed the different views in different reports. Rodda mentions again the problem of reception: i. e. of considering who wrote the accounts for which audience and for which purpose (cf. 135, 150, 175, 179). He sees “the notion of reconciliation” (131) between James I and Henry IV of France, but “royal authority both exalted and hindered the debate” (150) because of the king’s special position within power structures. In the final chapter, “Determination”, Rodda gives a sort of summary of themes discussed in

the preceding chapters. He argues that the format of disputation was used by all sides in the “cross-confessional controversy” (148) of the 16th and 17th centuries to discuss religion and inherently also politics. Scholarship and the role of the educated elites in society made religion and politics converge. Truth was used “as a weapon, not the object” (202). Meaning, truth was given and obvious and the conflict existed between what he calls the two “sureties” (204), namely “the absolute surety of faith – or at times the expected or necessary surety of faith – and the absolute, ‘scientific’ surety still enshrined in the scholastic process.” (204) Learning in the disciplines of “logic, rhetoric, history and philosophy” (204) was regarded as “a high premium” (204) among the elites of the period.

Rodda’s study is an excellent example of scholarship, on a solid basis of in-depth textual analysis. And here lies, from a Cultural Studies perspective, a deficiency of the study: too many detailed references to the actual texts. The study would have gained in relevance and a wider readership, if the author had put in more of the cultural heritage and background and left out the odd additional reference to a text. There are no theoretical approaches mentioned or applied for the analysis, no mention of Foucault, or Francis Bacon, and the power-knowledge-controversy and hegemonic structures in the religious and political discourses of the period. Rodda’s study puts the full emphasis on the textual basis and compiles quotations with hermeneutics. The bibliography is limited to the specific subject, no books listed which would give a hint about which theories underlie the analyses. A more concise structuring of the study would have been useful, as there are frequent repetitions, even *verbatim* on pages 129f.

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